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De-composing the Gothic Body in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*

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This article argues that the corpse seizure in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* epitomizes the fragmentation of Irish cultural identity, employing Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to reveal the gothic body as a site of indeterminacy. Narrative inconsistencies, or dislocutions, "de-compose" the text, registering both a distinctively gothic horror of loss and an obsessive need to record the abject state of the colonized. The dislocution of traumatic events signals a dissolving cultural distinctiveness that destabilizes time and meaning itself.
Keywords: Ireland, gothic, abjection, Edgeworth, body.

Résumé
Cet article montre que la saisie du cadavre dans Castle Rackrent de Maria Edgeworth emblématise la fragmentation de l'identité culturelle irlandaise. En s'appuyant sur la théorie de l'abject de Kristeva, il révèle le corps gothique comme un site d'indétermination. Des incohérences narratives décomposent le texte, et font apparaître à la fois un sentiment spécifiquement gothique lié à la perte et le besoin obsessionnel de formuler l'état abject des colonisés. Le brouillage narratif des événements traumatiques signale la dissolution d'une spécificité culturelle qui déstabilise la temporalité et le sens.
Mots clés : Irlande, gothique, abjection, Edgeworth, corps.

Introduction

Published just prior to the Act of Union, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) forecasts the dissolution of Irish identity in terms of a disorienting horror. The novel shares a preoccupation with loss and death with popular gothic productions of its day, like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), but while its prevailing atmosphere of deterioration envisages a grimly uncertain future for Ireland and its people, Edgeworth elevates this loss of identity to a transgressive fragmentariness, imagining colonization as a traumatic familial and national event capable of destabilizing meaning itself. And, to emphasize the profound personal impact of this

appropriation, Edgeworth narrates this pervasive decay through the gothic body, a site of multiplying and unfathomable alternities.

To introduce this troubling unpredictability, *Castle Rackrent* begins with an ending; the first of four family biographies told by self-appointed memoirist Thady Quirk concludes abruptly with the death of patriarch Sir Patrick Rackrent. Edgeworth employs the gothic trope of the stolen corpse in the opening chapter, where creditors interrupt Sir Patrick's funeral procession and confiscate his remains:

> Just as all was going on right, through his own town they were passing, when the body was seized for debt – a rescue was apprehended from the mob – but the heir who attended the funeral was against that, for fear of the consequences, seeing that those villains acted under disguise of the law – So to be sure, the law must take its course – and little gain had the creditors for their pains[1].

The dashes capture Thady's breathless shock as he relates the disruption of the funeral ritual, but they also call attention to the presence of an Editor, another key feature of the novel. The text of *Castle Rackrent* is itself a disjoined hybrid and colonized body of fragmented memories assembled by its English Editor, who solicits and then formally composes the family tales recounted orally by Irish narrator Thady Quirk, lifelong retainer of the House of Rackrent. However, the Editor further explains that Thady's impenetrable Irish dialect requires the further annotation of his recollections in a Glossary, where the Editor exerts further authority over the text by selecting, interpreting, and translating events from this oral family "history" for the benefit of an implied English reader unfamiliar with Ireland and her people. To convey Thady's complex description of the corpse seizure scene, the Editor uses dashes to separate the perspectives of creditors and mourners, as well as to dramatize Thady's horror at the suspended fate of the corpse, at exactly the critical moment when the patriarch's identity should be most firmly established, as the procession passes through "his own town". The dashes, therefore, help to recreate the confusion of the scene, drawing attention to several things at once: a decomposing corpse, interrupted funeral rites, the patriarch's identity with his land and town, the narrator's distress at the violation of taboos respecting the dead, and the Editor's authority to transcribe the trauma of dislocation. The event dissolves into fragmentary associations as its meaning degenerates, particularly since the unknown fate of the corpse suspends any linear plot trajectory towards an ending.

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1. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

The horror surrounding the seized corpse, inspiring such complex and entwined responses – biological, religious, personal, political, and editorial – identifies the narrative effect as distinctly gothic and aligns the abject with Ireland's loss of identity. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, describes abjection as a psychological state in which human efforts to construct meaning fail utterly; this collapse of explanation fosters horror, as even time and identity appear irreparably fractured and impossible to confirm[2]. Kristeva observes that we commonly bear witness to the abject when we are confronted by the inevitability of our physical dissolution. Evidences of bodily decomposition – notably corpses and illness – provide shocking reminders of our eventual corporeal decay, an irretrievable loss of identity we hold apart from ourselves as a fearful unreality, and which we inscribe in literature upon the gothic body, often spectral or lifeless. The pervasive fragmentation of the corpse seizure scene at the opening of *Castle Rackrent* therefore invites further examination of abjection as it renders Edgeworth's novel a gothic production, focused on the decay of a body and a family as signs of the impending dissolution of Irish national character at the crucial historical moment "when Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain[3]". The seizure of Sir Patrick's body in this liminal period as it travels between the family castle and the grave bears political import even as it also causes temporal, spatial, and narrative disruptions: the funeral ritual remains unfinished, the space of the intended grave lies open, and both narrator and Editor abruptly abandon Sir Patrick's history, leaving it disturbingly incomplete.

This reading of abjection and the gothic body builds on several important lines of critical commentary on *Castle Rackrent*, including discussions of Thady Quirk's unreliability, the Editor's role in composing the "memoir", and Edgeworth's ambivalence about Anglo-Irish politics on the eve of Union. In response to Marilyn Butler's assertion that the gothic, "remotest of all from daily reality", stands apart from the novel of social commentary, Kellie A. Donovan argues that *Castle Rackrent* employs destabilizing gothic conventions to call attention to the marginalized position of women; although she finds that *Castle Rackrent* "is not a gothic novel", she does acknowledge the confluence of social and gothic interests[4]. Joseph Kestner also recognizes the importance of this combination of impulses, interpreting Edgeworth's disjunctive technique as a means

2. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
3. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
4. Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 42. Kellie A. Donovan, "Imprisonment in *Castle Rackrent*: Maria Edgeworth's Use of Gothic Conventions", in Joachim Fischer and Brian Coates (eds.), *Back to the Present, Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History Since 1798*, Vol. 1, Amsterdam, NY, Rodopi, 2006, p. 146.

of fostering the social awareness common to Romantic-era regional novels[5]. Similarly, Daniel Hack's helpful discussion of Union in the novel identifies a method in its unreliable narration, reading in its "endless approach to and deferral of complete Union" a ratification of the hybrid Anglo-Irish ruling class[6]. Building on these readings of the novel as a commentary on union, I propose instead that Edgeworth's complex affiliations point to a more ominous view of Ireland's future. Reading the novel's fragmentariness through the lens of abjection, I point to the gothic body as a signifier of the potential horrors – personal, political, and cultural – consequent to Union. In this discussion, I follow Fred Botting's important distinction between terror and horror: "If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one's sense of self, horror describes the movement of contraction and recoil. […] [T]error marks the uplifting thrill, where horror distinguishes a contraction at the imminence and unavoidability of the threat. Terror expels after horror glimpses invasion, reconstituting the boundaries that horror has seen dissolve[7]." Terror, a temporary state of apprehension that allows us to return to safety after experiencing the sublime, is therefore ultimately generative, while horror forces our confrontation of destructive forces we dread and cannot avoid, the impending abject that disturbs and disrupts narrative because it represents the breakdown of signification, here a breakdown consequent to union.

Corpses prompt abjection in the narrative, provoking the horror of lost meaning and unstable identity. Producing textual gaps in the linear history of the family/nation's decline, Edgeworth articulates abjection through verbal *dislocutions*, accidental or deliberate "mistellings" that disrupt both spatial and temporal logic, creating the novel's gothic effect. Her use of this technique to "decompose" the text and destabilize the forward movement of narrative anticipates a similar effect in Joyce; in this vein, Fritz Senn's 1984 study, *Joyce's Dislocutions: Essays on Reading as Translation*, describes the indeterminacy of Joycean language, where "an emerging pattern tends to be discredited as soon as it becomes discernible[8]". These terms can help us to appreciate the similarly experimental quality of Edgeworth's narrative technique in *Castle Rackrent*, particularly the confusing opaqueness of her language, its capability of multiple simultaneous (and even contradictory) meanings that often require an act of translation to make sense out of the obscure and the referential. And, of course, her use of the Editor further points to translation as a sign of Irish cultural dislocation, a collapse of national

5. Joseph Kestner, "Defamiliarization in the Romantic Regional Novel: Maria Edgeworth, Walter Scott, John Gibson Lockhart, Susan Ferrier, and John Galt", *Wordsworth Circle,* vol. 10, 1979, p. 326-330.
6. Daniel Hack, "Inter-Nationalism: *Castle Rackrent* and Anglo-Irish Union", *Novel*, Vol. 29 No. 2, Winter 1996.
7. Fred Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 10.
8. Fritz Senn, *Joyce's Dislocutions: Essays on Reading as Translation*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 114.

identity that no doubt appeared imminent on the eve of political Union. The initial funeral episode in *Castle Rackrent* furnishes an instance of how Thady's dislocutions effectively "de-compose" the gothic bodies – corporeal and textual – that evoke abjection and advance Edgeworth's political critique.

Dead metaphors: de-composing the gothic corpse

Sir Patrick's decomposing corpse occupies a transitional space between the estate and the grave, both locations signifying land and nation, but his personal identity deteriorates as creditors and mourners debate its fate. The stolen remains become a metaphor for the appropriation, devaluation, and inevitable extinction of Irish identity. Thady first characterizes Sir Patrick by describing his debts, incurred by a traditional Irish hospitality that illuminates both his status and generosity, but once creditors and his heir successfully assign a monetary value to his corpse, Sir Patrick's human identity collapses into an exclusively economic register. The body's public deterioration from Irish patriarch Sir Patrick (*he*) to unclaimed corpse (*it*), a signifier of a certain sum of money, provokes the abject, as narrator Thady can only convey the spectacle of commodified decay in terms of hopeless unintelligibility. If even the corpse of an important person, a landowning patriarch like Sir Patrick, can be seized and bargained over, his human status translated to a specific exchange value at the very moment when his personal qualities should be most remembered and firmly fixed "in his own town", then stable meaning can only be an illusion; the linear narrative begins to unravel. In textually disjointed moments like the corpse seizure, all forms of identity – personal, familial, historical, economic, and political – fall away from meaning, a deterioration that haunts the text and resonates throughout the remaining three family histories.

Decomposing physically, already decayed epistemologically by his son's unsentimental devaluation, Sir Patrick's remains become inadequate collateral for debt, "little gain" for the trouble of disrupting a funeral. The creditors mistakenly assume that the corpse represents Sir Patrick the rightful Irish landlord and father, that his status requires his heir to pay any debts in order to complete the funeral rites to which the corpse is entitled by religion and local custom. To them, the body signifies a stable personal and political identity. However, Sir Patrick's son and heir, the litigious Sir Murtagh, surrenders the body instead of paying his father's debts, and the narrator invites us to consider that Sir Murtagh's alleged "fear of the consequences" of the law *could* be a miserly reluctance to pay what is owed, since the surrender of the body frees him from further financial obligation. However, even as Thady obligingly reports this side of the question, he invalidates it as malicious gossip: "It was whispered (but none but the enemies of the family

believe it) that this was all a sham seizure to get quit of the debts, which he had bound himself to pay in honor[9].” Thady dislocutes by simultaneously proposing and retracting an interpretation, decomposing the tale even as he composes it. By claiming that the seizure insults the deceased by interrupting the funeral rites, the “great lawyer” Sir Murtagh can legally avoid paying his father’s debts while occupying the moral high ground, yet we learn that the “sham seizure” could possibly have been pre-arranged[10]. Thady’s equivocations, and the impossibility of discerning the truth from the evidence he provides, illustrate a Joycean collapse of meaning. Meaning decays into a state of abjection, like Sir Patrick’s cadaver, a monstrous fallen signifier, no longer patriarch or father, valued by his son at the sum of his debts, but nonetheless a valueless burden to his creditors, who cannot recover their money.

Although the narrative quickly passes to consider the next Rackrent baronet, this brief episode in the novel’s opening pages introduces the gothic body as a site of indeterminacy, summoning gothic horror as the collapse of meaning threatens personal and national identity. As Kristeva describes it in *Powers of Horror*,

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs *identity, system, order*. What does not respect borders, positions, rules[11].

As the corpse is arrested unceremoniously on its journey from house to grave, Thady Quirk’s account of its journey derails from the linear expectations of the historical narrative, which Edgeworth’s Editor promises will picture an authentic Irish *identity* for the English reader, employing the *system* of describing each heir in chronological *order*. Instead, the seizure of the body defies the historical, interposing instead a gap in meaning, a chasm of abjection that echoes with gothic resonance, revealing the family history itself as a de-composed textual body. The abject spectacle, in Kristeva’s formulation, triggers the narrator’s dislocution, his inability to enact meaning, which in turn inspires the Editor to perform an act of translation to decode the textual instabilities that point to decay, dissolution, and degeneration.

By obstructing the corpse’s final journey to the grave, the creditors open the gothic possibility of its further influence on the living, as Anne Ridge observes

9. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.
11. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, *op. cit.*, p. 4, my emphasis.

that in Ireland "this liminal period, between death and burial, was always looked upon as a danger zone[12]". Specific rituals governing the deceased's procession from the "corpse house" (here the castle where the body lay before interment) to the grave ensured that the dead would rest peacefully and marked a clear boundary between the dead and the living, a type of narrative contract to assure a satisfactory ending. Bound to honor the dead by religion and tradition, the living observe specific funerary rites of passage, including recitation of the proper words (the burial service) and performance of the proper actions (procession and interment), because they expect the dead to "observe" the border between life and death by not returning to vex the living. Its rituals completed, death may be regarded as the end of a living subject's capacity for narration. Although the dead exert influence on Thady's narrative as the subjects of his memories, they can no longer relate their own stories. In this context, Thady's "history", an oral recitation of the lives and deaths of the Rackrents, both reanimates the Irish landowners through retold memories *and* exerts a control over them and their life stories that he could not have asserted while they lived. For instance, within the narrative, Thady can choose to abbreviate or extend a life story. Sir Condy's life, related separately in the "Continuation of the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family", comprises half of the entire novel, while Sir Patrick's part is brief and stark.

Thady's horror at the seizure of the corpse causes him to retell the episode; it is the first significant historical event he recalls, yet he further dislocutes by scrambling temporal sequence. Although his first pains are to establish his authority as memoirist, Thady reveals that he only has second-hand knowledge of the corpse seizure; after he waxes admiringly on Sir Patrick's generous hospitality, describing the patriarch's guest accommodations with the inside authority and detail of a first-hand observer, Thady discloses that he never actually *saw* Sir Patrick. His grandfather, he recalls, was Sir Patrick's driver, perhaps the patriarch's contemporary or even his junior. Thady further disrupts linear sequence by adding that it was his *great*-grandfather who witnessed Sir Patrick's demise when, "a few days before his death" Sir Patrick drank the "bumper toast" that proved fatal, as "Sir Patrick died that night[13]". A few sentences later, Thady misplaces his own temporal position in the narrative, offering his great-grandfather's description of Sir Patrick's death and funeral, which occurred "before I was born long", and then abruptly referring to himself as "old Thady", an established *adult* member of the household at the time of Sir Patrick's funeral[14]. Time collapses with the confusion of generations and sequential events, as Thady inserts himself into what

12. Anne Ridge, *Death Customs in Rural Ireland: Traditional Funerary Rites in the Irish Midlands*, Galway, Ireland, Arlen, 2009, p. 60.
13. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.,* p. 10-11.
14. *Ibid*, p. 17, 7.

might be his great-grandfather's memory, but indeterminacy betrays the power Sir Patrick's death holds for him and underlines his narrative aggression, his need to make sense of his relation to the phobic event. Thady's claim to an authority that he admits he cannot possess stands as a sign of the destabilized meanings that create abjection in *Castle Rackrent.* What is remarkable about the tale is that Thady knows it at all – that the details of Sir Patrick's life, death, and the seizure of his corpse have been preserved through four generations of Quirks serving the Rackrents testifies not only to the purchase of memory but more importantly to the symbolization of the phobic object, the corpse, which comes to represent the loss of family/national identity. Sir Patrick's gothic body, unburied and unacknowledged, continues to rot metaphorically just as Thady continues to de-compose the family narrative from his own contradictory recollections: "Whether it be projected memory or hallucination, the phobic object has led us, on the one hand, to the borders of psychosis, and on the other, to the strongly structuring power of symbolicity[15]." Kristeva attributes this repeated effort to impose a system, even a contradictory one, on the abject to a phobic panic in the face of pervasive fragmentation.

Thady's obsessive confrontation of decay through narration defines him as a *deject*, as "the one by whom the abject exists[16]". Narrative is his only means of bringing himself into being, as it were, since his life has been entirely absorbed by and inscribed on those of his employers. As he tells what is, presumably, *their* history, he inevitably tells his own, as well as the history of Ireland's colonial experience. Through this memoir, we learn that Thady belongs to no one but the Rackrents. He is in Kristeva's term a *stray*, one who "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines […] constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh[17]". This is the predicament of the colonized, Edgeworth suggests, straining to recover and reinstate a past state. Similarly, through narration, the ghostlike Thady can address the abject corpse of each Rackrent lord and attempt to exert control over the phobic object by "reanimating" it, bringing his memories to life for the Editor and the reader, as he continues to do by relating the death stories of Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Condy.

If, as Kristeva suggests, the abject lies "in the way one speaks", the Editor's dislocutions qualify him as another deject, perhaps a more severe deject since he better comprehends the larger, transnational political significance of decay/Union[18]. Of course, the Editor has a different stake in the relating of memories, which serve ostensibly as instruction to the English reader. Acknowledging that

15. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, *op. cit.,* p. 46.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*

Thady is "scarcely intelligible" and in the Glossary undertaking to translate and explain Irish culture and religion, the Editor imposes a surface linearity on the de-composed, dislocuted oral text, deciphering and recomposing Thady's memories to form a more coherent, progressive history[19]. As many critics have noted, the Editor's Glossary constitutes a competing narrative, containing and reshaping Thady's memories, and exerting control over Thady's efforts to exert control over the Rackrent history, yet another assertion of colonial dominance.

While Thady attempts to control the phobic specter of the dissolute and disappearing family, the object of his desire necessary to constitute his identity as subject, the Editor's oscillation between Irish and English perspectives dislocates him politically and historically, echoing the Edgeworth family's troublesome position as Anglo-Irish landowners with shifting sympathies[20]. By representing two alternative positions, the Editor also refuses to acknowledge the potential collapse of Irish identity, focusing instead on cataloguing and imposing a linear sequence on the lives (and particularly the deaths) of the Rackrent heirs. The gothic body emerges as the metaphor through which both Editor and narrator dislocute their respective senses of lack, as each history ends with a death, but the corpse itself is a shifting signifier that evades their continuing effort to revive meaning.

Time and the fallen: dislocating the gothic body politic

As a family "memoir", the narrative ostensibly reconstructs a historical sequence of events, yet time is the first border to be violated by the abject. In *Castle Rackrent*, lost temporality marks a foundering national identity mirrored in the de-composition of the text, as we see in the example of the seized corpse, which slips from the narrative entirely, its linear path cut off in the face of a traumatic loss of individual, familial, and finally national signification. In "Women's Time", Kristeva describes the political ramifications of this identity crisis, noting that nations formulating or reformulating a distinctive native character typically experience "a double problematic: that of their *identity* constituted by historical sedimentation, and that of their *loss of identity* which is produced by this connection of memories which escape from history. […] In other words, we confront two temporal dimensions: the time of "linear history", […] and the time of

19. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.,* p. 4.

20. Marilyn Butler carefully delineates how these sympathies played out in both Edgeworths' writings, particularly in the jointly authored *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), which she claims "came into being as a gesture of intellectual solidarity with the United Irish cause, probably in response to the Dublin government's shutting down of the main United Irish newspaper, Samuel Neilson's *Northern Star*, in May 1797". See "Edgeworth, the United Irishmen, and 'More Intelligent Treason'", in Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (eds.), *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, Newark, DE, University of Delaware Press, 2004, p. 34.

another history, […] *monumental time*[21]". For unstable nations, monumental time does not progress chronologically, residing in the memory of enclosed (often traumatic) events that acquire metaphorical significance as they define national crisis, but linear history requires sequence and causality as structuring principles. In *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth employs linear time to trace each inheritor's personal history as it contributes to the simultaneous decline of the tale, the family and the nation – as Jarlath Killeen observes in *Gothic Ireland*, "a disintegrating house stands at the centre of a disintegrating text about a disintegrating island[22]". While readers witness the deterioration of a homeland as Edgeworth charts the parallel decline of house and family, she also disrupts the linear narrative with abject monumental events, like the corpse seizure, that politicize the novel's gothic atmosphere by pointing to the dissolution of meaning and identity, thus projecting the horror not only of personal but also of national extinction.

Edgeworth's social position as landed Anglo-Irish gentry problematizes her response to the debate over Union, which was resolved only a few months after the publication of *Castle Rackrent*; while the Edgeworths had originally believed that "such a merger would increase investment of English resources in Ireland and improve Irish trade", in fact at the last minute Richard Edgeworth voted against Union, realizing that "the government in Westminster had bribed Irish Parliament members[23]". Edgeworth appears to gloss over the impact of marginalization in her preface to the novel, where she excuses her unsympathetic portrayal of the Irish landowner by remarking that "nations as well as individuals gradually lose attachment to their identity […]. When Ireland loses her identity by a union with Great Britain, she will look back with a smile of good-humoured complacency[24]". This has often been read as a unionist nod, reflecting Edgeworth's belief that union would eventually improve Ireland's economy, as Frazer Easton has observed in pointing to her Smithian view that "commercial transactions between nations could ameliorate the social and material inequities of a colonial system[25]". However, the passing reference to lost national identity opens the traumatic question of lost memory, of a time past and a historical identity that the Irish will gradually "lose attachment" to, and we can better gauge Edgeworth's response to this threatened abyss through both Thady's anxiety to record (and thus preserve) the

21. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time", in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 189.
22. Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Portland, OR, Four Courts Books, 2005, p. 191.
23. Kathleen Kirkpatrick, "Introduction", *The Wild Irish Girl* by Sydney Owenson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. iv-v.
24. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
25. Frazer Easton, "Cosmopolitical Economy: Exchangeable Value and National Development in Adam Smith and Maria Edgeworth", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 42 No.1, Spring 2003, p. 99-125.

Rackrent history and the Editor's urgent efforts to provide the English reader with an intelligible record of Irish life and manners before the Union.

The Rackrent body signifies on both personal and political registers, as a sign of specifically Irish moral failings that leave their mark on the estate/nation and precipitate the decline and eventual extinction of the family line/national character. For Vera Kreilkamp, this theme of parallel decay indicates that "The Irish house must be put in order, purged of its native shiftlessness; the state of the house and the state of the nation are related[26]". Sir Patrick dies of drink, leaving the estate burdened by debt, confirming Sinéad Sturgeon's reading of alcohol's "repeated association with death, functioning as an index of destructive dissipation[27]". Despite the importance of lineage to a family history, the reader never learns the fate of Sir Patrick's body, ironically surrendered to the law by his son and heir, the Law of the Father seemingly upended and emptied of meaning. If the creditors bury the body, the reader never learns where or under what circumstances. Moreover, as cadaver, Sir Patrick fails to sustain identity and falls – *cadere* – falls away as a signifier, calling into question the horrifyingly fragile, temporary meanings of human life, identity, property, and political status[28]. Only Thady's memory, confronted by that abject spectacle of disintegration, struggles against the collapse of meaning by emphasizing the linear, historical time of the Rackrent heirs.

Although the narrative "seems to naturalize patriarchal and aristocratic values" endorsing *linear time*, "its mode of representation undercuts these links[29]". For instance, Thady's account of Sir Patrick's inheritance and forced conversion ostensibly points to sequence, but in actuality serves as a marker of unstable temporality and fallen identity. The hybrid Rackrent family combines original Irish Catholic and grafted Anglo-Protestant branches, the Irish O'Shaughlins having been dispossessed by the English Rackrents, who, eventually failing of an English heir, leave the estate to Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin, who must change his surname and conform to the Anglican Church to claim his inheritance; as Catherine Gallagher observes, this "dispossession […] of their mythicized geneaology, is the very condition on which their property is held[30]". According to Thady, this renunciation Sir Patrick "took sadly to heart […] but thought better of it afterwards, seeing how large a stake depended on it[31]". As Killeen explains, many Irish families employed this outer conformity

26. Vera Krielkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 1998, p. 35.
27. Sinéad Sturgeon, "The Politics of Poitín: Maria Edgeworth, Williams Carleton, and the Battle for the Spirit of Ireland", *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 14 No. 4, 2006, pp. 431-445.
28. Kristeva points to the similarity in words meaning "fallen" (*Powers of Horror*, p. 3).
29. Fred Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
30. Catherine Gallagher, "Fictional Women and Real Estate in *Castle Rackrent*", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 12 No. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 11-18.
31. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

"to reverse a colonial usurpation", as the 1704 Act for Preventing the Further Growth of Popery actually "effectively allowed crafty Gaelic families to repossess the lands taken from them […] by outwardly conforming to the Established Church after the death of their Norman relatives[32]". Through intermarriage with the Rackrents, the O'Shaughlins eventually reassert their claim to the property that had been theirs to begin with, complicating linear sequence by doubling back to reconstitute a prior Gaelic Catholic identity under the pretense of moving forward as Anglo-Irish Protestants. However, Sir Patrick's renunciation of Catholicism and of the family name fails to erase the past, where the trauma of dispossession still resides in local memory.

Although Sir Patrick's acceptance of the Rackrent name preserves its Anglo-Irish identity (by its emphasis on the English surname, an ever-present reminder of exploitation), local residents remember the O'Shaughlin family name, and so Thady's first history, the tale of Sir Patrick, celebrates the estate's return to a Catholic heir and thus revives *monumental time*, the traumatic memory of Irish identity prior to the English dispossession. Since convert landowners retained their Gaelic aristocratic identities in the community, the family's Catholic identity also remained intact in the minds of the locals, who like Thady may have acknowledged the strategic advantages of conformity[33]. Although a fallen or *lapsed* (from the Latin *lapsus*: slipped, fallen) Catholic by virtue of his Anglican conformity, Sir Patrick nonetheless receives the honor of the Gaelic funeral *whillaluh*, but Thady cannot recover the Catholic past without also marking its association with the time of English occupation, noting the striking appearance of the mourners by remarking, "to see all the women even in their red coats, you would have taken them for the army drawn out[34]". Thady's account dislocates time by referring to the military's role in dispossession; here Thady also *dislocutes* and de-composes the narrative by employing a metaphor that complicates the meaning of the scene, comparing Irish Catholic female mourners to English Protestant male soldiers, enforcers of the laws that oppress Catholics, an "instantaneous mental dislocation" similar to the ones Giorgio Melchiori observes in *A Portrait of the Artist*, and a sign of monumental time, a past traumatic memory reimagined and superimposed on the present[35]. From the position of the colonized, Thady Quirk must narrate because he cannot *act* – his narrative aggression struggles against the hopeless disorganization and observable deterioration of Irish culture represented

32. Jarlath Killeen, *op. cit.,* p. 198.
33. *Ibid.,* p. 198.
34. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
35. Giorgio Melchiori, "The Languages of Joyce",in Rosa Maria Bolletieri, Carla Marengo, and Christine van Bohemen (eds.), *Selected Papers from the 11th Annual James Joyce Symposium, Venice 1988*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Press, 1992, p. 5.

by the series of Rackrent corpses he forms into the gothic textual body, their family history.

Conclusion: the corpse and gothic indeterminacy

As with the corpse seizure, the pattern of indeterminacy in the novel has to do with Thady's obsessive forecasting of death. Lady Kit, Lady Isabella, and Sir Condy are all falsely reported to be dead, and plot events proceed on those mistaken assumptions, even when the report remains unverified, as though a verifiable truth is no more authoritative than any other utterance. Reported "kilt and smashed" in a carriage accident – a phrase that evokes a gothic depiction of graphic carnage – Lady Isabella is the subject of a false counter-narrative circulated by her former rival, Judy M'Quirk, Thady's great-niece[36]. The Editor intervenes to translate this dislocution by informing us that "kilt" does not mean "killed" in local parlance, but rather indicates intensity of experience, as in the expression "*I'm kilt all over with the rheumatism*[37]". Dislocution, however, calls attention to the destabilizing of all meaning and narrative authority, as it turns out that "dead" does not mean dead, either – for example, Sir Condy falsifies his own death in order to hear what people say about him at his wake. The false report of Isabella's death serves as a counterpart to the corpse seizure scene. Thady appropriates and (for a time) suppresses her textual body, even as her physical body is unexpectedly arrested, allegedly "smashed" on its journey from the castle to her childhood home. Like Sir Patrick, whose profligacy returns in a new form with each subsequent heir, Isabella returns to hover over the final pages of the unresolved Rackrent history, a ghostly presence that reiterates the abjection attending familial decay and national extinction. The erroneous report of Isabella's death gathers more significance by the novel's close; although Thady's son Jason believes that he has acquired title to Castle Rackrent legally, Isabella's tenacious hold on life means that she and Jason must litigate over the jointure memorandum, and Aileen Douglas's remark that these "fears for property are regularly expressed through the vulnerability of crucial documents" points to the forthcoming legal action as it predicts future indeterminacy and waste[38]. Accordingly, Thady abandons the narrative at this point. Whether Jason or Isabella wins the suit, both the estate and the family are irretrievably lost, and Ireland has become a corpse, shed of meaning, its spectacle of decay and the traumatic memory of dispossession inspiring horror.

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36. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
37. *Ibid.,* p. 85.
38. Aileen Douglas, "Maria Edgeworth's Writing Classes", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 14 Nos. 3-4, April-July 2002, p. 371-390.

In chronicling the Rackrent drive to extinction, Thady cannot help but decompose his fragmented tales of their dead, maimed, and imprisoned bodies, horrified by the spectre of dissolution that echoes Ireland's experience of dispossession. While the Editor, conscious of his English audience, recomposes Thady's oral narrative of crumbling memories, imposing legibility along with a Glossary of historical and cultural notes, the novel's internal contradictions, evoking the trauma of colonization through references to monumental events, often interfere with its stated purpose as a linear history. Smashed or seized, silenced or sequestered, the gothic body in *Castle Rackrent* registers the abject by describing the dissolution of Irish identity, a traumatic loss on both personal and national scales.